

A Night on the Flight Line

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It was a late summer day in 1993 at Dover AFB, DE and I had just rolled in to work. It was 1427. Not 1415. Not 1432. *1427*. I always precisely timed my arrival so that when I got to work, it would only be a couple of minutes before roll call. Why, you may ask? Because if I arrived any earlier, I might be asked to do some work before my shift started. I learned this lesson a year and a half earlier when I foolishly arrived at work around 1410. Seeing me milling about the tables and benches of our old hangar, MSgt. Dowdy asked if I would clean the bathroom since dayshift "forgot" to do it. Yeah, sure. Half of dayshift was still out on the flight line, and the ones who normally hung out in the break area had blown it off and gone home. Still, I had been "asked" to clean the bathroom and when you're an airman you don't question polite requests. You can, however, learn from your mistakes and avoid picking up the slack for poor, lazy management in the future.

Anyway, 1430 rolled around and it was time for roll call. During the early '90s, we held our roll calls between two temporary structures built inside a massive hangar. Each of these two story buildings housed an AMU, or Aircraft Maintenance Unit. I was with the Blue Wizards and my flight was Wizard 6. The other AMU was the Red Dragons, whose swing-shift started an hour later than ours did. Yes, I know those nicknames are stupid, but we had nothing to do with it. When I first arrived, we were known by our radio call sign: Sierra. Shortly after, we were split into two AMUs during the Total Quality Maintenance craze of the early '90s and designated "Blue" and "Red." Both AMUs were organized under the newly renamed 436th Aircraft Generation Squadron. The Wizards and Dragons nonsense was the brainchild of an outside troubleshooter named Col. Frenchie. He figured that having these goofy nicknames would foster pride and inspire healthy competition between the two AMUs. Eventually, the silliness reached its inevitable conclusion when an idea for a third AMU, meant to collect all of the civilians and Air Reserve Technicians under one roof, was tentatively named the White Knights. A few influential African-American NCOs finally raised the bullshit flag and we reverted back to the far more sensible "Blue" and "Red" AMUs.

So, we're standing at roll call, but instead of the usual briefing about various issues that were always "HOT," a portly Captain stepped forward and introduced himself as some sort of mid-level functionary in our unit. I don't really remember what his job was. All I know is that he was a standard-issue generic officer with a handheld radio and a clipboard. He gave the requisite welcome speech with all of the forgettable boilerplate that all officers spouted off when they assumed command of something. The only part of his spiel that I remember was his final thought, since it was so odd. He said, "Let's remember to have fun out there. If you're not having fun, something's wrong."

You almost felt sorry for these guys. They were nice people who I think genuinely wanted to do good, but Dover could turn even the most idealistic man to the Dark Side. I believe that if Buddha himself were stationed at Dover, he'd soon be a bitter, chain-smoking alcoholic whose only release from living death would be cheap booze and easy broads. Capt. Portly was no exception. Within six months, he'd been Dover-ized. He

became an angry, little fat man who seemed more worried about maintenance of weight standards (Pot-Kettle-Black) than maintenance of aircraft. He eventually left, as all officers do, except in this case he was gone before his two year slum tour was up. Rumor had it that he was caught having fun with a pretty blonde airman from Dragon side.

Capt. Portly finished his speech and our civilian shift leader, Mr. MysteryTour, stepped forward and read off the aircraft assignments. The guys who weren't assigned to a plane went outside to smoke or went into the break room to hang out until needed. Now, that break room deserves a story itself. When the temporary buildings were first erected, the break room was just a large, open room on the bottom floor. It had some square tables and chairs, but that was about it.

Col. Frenchie, the erstwhile troubleshooter, noticed that these square tables and chairs were conducive to card playing, so he ordered furniture whose style was best described as "MacDonaldland." He had turned our break room into a fast-food restaurant, minus the food counter. We even had the swivel-chairs. You see, Col. Frenchie figured that if the furniture was awkward and uncomfortable, we would rather stay out and work on the airplanes than sit around inside playing cards and watching TV. Col. Frenchie had made a critical error that would prove his undoing: He underestimated the common aircraft maintainer. We're trained to troubleshoot and solve problems. We're taught to overcome obstacles and do anything to get the job done. We weren't going to let some MacDonaldland furniture prevent us from enjoying our birthright. Within two weeks, Col. Frenchie was dismayed to find the break room was still full of loud, raucous mechanics engaged in various games of Spades, Hearts, and Pinochle. We had improvised, adapted, and overcome. Col. Frenchie disappeared a couple of weeks later, presumably to meddle in the affairs of some other unit with which he had no familiarity.

I stepped into the modified blue step-van that served as our primary conveyance between the hangar and the flight line. Dragon side had all their planes parked right in front of the hangar, so they could just walk right on out to their planes, but our planes were parked down at the far, far end of the ramp. If you wanted, you could use the Shoe Leather Express, but walking half-a-mile with a 75 lb. toolbox on your shoulder was not the best way to start your shift. Mr. MysteryTour, besides being our shift supervisor, was also the truck driver, call-sign "Wizard-6."

We loaded everyone up and started the journey to our side of the flight line. Mr. MysteryTour, oblivious to the fact that the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line, almost always took a lazy, meandering route to the flight line. As he was driving, various people out on the planes would call him on the radio, triggering his instinct to turn the wheel and head off in their direction before telling them that he couldn't make it. He'd then turn the wheel in the other direction, thus closing the circle and heading off on his original course. Depending on radio traffic, it could take anywhere from five minutes to an hour to make it to your plane while aboard the Magical Mystery Tour.

Mr. MysteryTour finally pulled up to my plane. I hauled my toolbox out of the truck and made my way toward the Crew Entry Door, being careful not to walk in front of the truck, because MysteryTour had a habit of running over airmen as he absent-mindedly careened about the flight line. He'd already taken out at least two airmen and I had no intention of being next up on the hit parade.

As I carried my toolbox to the plane, I could see the telltale omens signaling a rough night: numerous panels littered the ground about the plane, B-5 and B-2 stands were pre-positioned all over the place, and the dayshift guy walked towards me with a look of both defeat and joy at my arrival.

The dayshift crew chief, Sgt. Kraut, tossed the radio at me like he was getting rid of highly radioactive material. I soon found out why about fifteen seconds later.

<<6013, MACC>>

Both of us looked at the radio like it was belching out some indecipherable tongue.

<<6013, MACC>>

Kraut cocked his eyebrow. "You gonna get that?"

The look in his eyes seemed to scream, "Please, for the love of god, answer it!"

I nodded and keyed the mic. "MACC, One-Three. Go ahead."

<< Roger, One-Three. What's the status of Job Number 1427? >>

I looked questioningly to Kraut. "That's the T/R leak. It's good to go. It's allowed to leak statically."

I nodded and answered the Maintenance Control Center. "Roger, MACC. Close that one out, within limits."

<< Copy, One-Three. What about Job Numbers 1428 to 1453? >>

I threw my arms up in the air in exasperation and asked Kraut, "What the hell is that shit?"

"It's a long story."

I keyed the mic and shot the skunk eye at Kraut. "Standby MACC, I'll get back with ya on those after turnover."

Thirty minutes later, we finished shift turnover. The aircraft forms were a mess, there were specialists and ARTs (civilian Air Reserve Technicians) running all over the place,

and I was the man with the radio. It's not good to be The Man with the Radio. Everyone and their brother call you every 30 seconds asking the same damned questions over and over again, preventing you from getting any meaningful work done. Luckily, two more swing-shifters showed up and I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw they outranked me. The most senior guy on the plane was supposed to take the radio, so I anticipated relinquishing it at the soonest opportunity.

Staff Sergeants McCool and Hutch sat down. Well, "sat" is too generic a term. McCool slid into the seat opposite me and Hutch collapsed into the seat across the aisle from me like a pile of laundry. He looked like he was wearing the same uniform from the previous night. In fact, I'm certain that it was, since it looked like he had slept in it. I don't think he had actually changed clothes after work. His face was pale, he had dark circles under his eyes, and his mouth was just short of fully closed. Diagnosis: Brown Water Flu.

McCool calmly looked at the forms, going slowly from page to page and nodding his head from time to time. I started slowly, almost imperceptibly, sliding the radio across the table towards him. I had almost got it to the point where it was nearer him than to me when he stopped mid page-turn and looked at the radio, then to me. He did this a couple of times before resuming his page turning. "You've got the radio tonight."

Shit.

McCool, finished with the forms, addressed Hutch and me. "Alright, this is what we're going to do." He gave us the priority write-ups and ran through the sequence of events for the night. He doled out our respective lists of write-ups to work and told us to get at it. He would stay at the table coordinating everything, without the radio. In other words, I would coordinate everything on the move while he fucked-off upstairs.

Hutch and I got up to head downstairs. Well, I got up at least. Hutch slowly leaned forward and let gravity do the rest until he hit the wall opposite him and assumed a stance that, if you cocked your head and squinted your eyes, could be mistaken for a standing human being. I headed down the passageway towards the Flight Deck ladder.

"Yo, P!" McCool yelled after me. I turned around. "Don't forget the radio."

"But if you know everything that's going on, wouldn't it make sense for you to keep it?" It seemed like a sensible enough question, it being his job and all.

"Hell no, I ain't talking on that damned thing. If they call, ask me and I'll tell you what to say."

I slowly exhaled, knowing the whole thing was futile anyway. "Alright."

Three hours later, after running up and down a twenty foot B-2 stand a few dozen times to ask McCool what the hell was going on so I could answer MACC and the Production

Supervisor's questions, the only thing I had accomplished was stripping out numerous screws on a panel.

I looked at my watch. It was 1800 and our lunches still had not arrived yet. During this particular time in history, the Air Force was coming out of the RIF (Reduction in Force) and still deploying people to various areas of the world in support of myriad operations. Manning was a little low at work because of that and other things, so instead of getting a chow break, we ordered "Box Nasties" at the beginning of the shift. The truck driver would then go and pick them up around 1730 and start delivering them to the aircraft. We'd inhale the meager meals out at the plane and then get back to work as soon as possible. Box Nasties in those days weren't all that great. They contained one each ham and cheese sandwich, one each fruit, and one each drink. If you were lucky, you got a lunch with a foreign Coke featuring some indecipherable script--surplus from the Gulf War. All I ever got were drink cartons full of Apple Juice that tasted like pears and whose only exotic feature was that "Artificial Colour" had the Queen's spelling. Still, it hit the spot and was sorely needed on rough nights.

Tonight was shaping up to be one of those rough nights, but it was starting to get on with no sign of the Box Lunches' imminent arrival. I made one last scan of the flight line for our errant truck and finding no sign of it, resigned myself to going back on the airplane. I walked up the crew entry door ladder and jumped into the cargo compartment of the aircraft. As I was walking around the forward ramp area, I heard a loud *THUNK!* and looked to the back of the airplane to see the Red Headed Stepchild himself at the Aft Ramp/Door Control panel. Somehow, during all the fuss and confusion of the preceding three hours, this screw-up had skillfully inserted himself into my aircraft. I was wondering just what in the hell this bastard was doing on my plane, so I started walking back there to find out.

Now, the aft cargo door/ramp system on the C-5 is a complex kluge. Its main feature is a floating pressure door that, depending on what type of cargo is being loaded, also doubles as a ramp extension. It is not permanently attached to the aircraft. SrA Chamberpot was attempting to open the door in "Truckbed" mode for palletized cargo, but I noticed that he had not hit the two most important valves needed to correctly perform this procedure.

Let me try to break it down here for you. There was a bit of an unorthodox procedure when it came to opening the doors in "Truckbed" mode. Halfway through the procedure, you must manually depress two hydraulic valves, labeled "C" and "I" that would position two actuators which would lock a couple of latches on to the pressure door and actuate it upwards against the top of the cargo compartment when the appropriate switch was hit.

As I was observing Chamberpot going through the motions of opening the rear doors, I noticed that he had failed to perform this critical step and was about to potentially drop a 3+ ton metal slab onto the cargo floor.* Noticing his hand was on the switch to start the final process of opening up the ramp, I began running and frantically waving my arms around in the air, yelling "C & I! C & I!" over and over again at the top of my lungs. Since both APUs (Auxiliary Power Units) were running and the hydraulic systems were

on, it was impossible for him to hear me. He apparently saw me gesticulating like a wild man and turned to face me, his hand still on the switch. He stared at me with that typical blank stare of his and shook his head. He looked puzzled, but then again, that was his usual appearance. He shrugged his shoulders and turned around to face the back doors.

I was running for all I was worth. The length of the C-5 is about as long as a football field (at least it seemed that way), and I was at about the opponent's 30-yard line when I lifted my arm and hurled the radio at Chamberpot in mid-step. It tumbled end over end and clocked the stupid son of a bitch right on the side of the noggin. I didn't mean to hit him in the head; it was just a lucky shot. He crumpled in on himself. I had knocked the dumb bastard out cold. I ran up to him, saw he was still breathing, looked up, and quickly returned the ramp/door system back to its normal, safe state. I looked down at Chamberpot and briefly considered ending his pathetic existence right then and there, but decided life in Leavenworth wasn't worth it.

Chamberpot came-to and slowly got up. "What happened, man?" he asked in the most dumbass accent I had ever heard. The guy sounded like a mix between Bubba from *"Forrest Gump"* and Bullwinkle the Moose.

"You were about to drop the damned pressure door on your head, dumbass," I replied.

Chamberpot looked up the massive pressure door. "Thanks, man. Guess I shoulda used the checklist, huh?" He started laughing.

"Huhuhuhuhuh," I laughed back at him mockingly. He stopped laughing and looked down. There on the cargo floor was the radio, its antenna broken and the battery pack cracked at the point of impact on Chamberpot's thick, Neanderthal-like skull. I keyed it a couple of times, but it was dead.

"Huh huh huh. You're in trooooooooooble!"

I immediately regretted sparing his life.

SrA Chamberpot and I egressed the aircraft a few moments later to the sound of a honking horn. The Wizard-6 truck had finally arrived, but Mr. MysteryTour was no longer at the wheel. In his place was MSgt. Dapperdo, one of the most well-regarded NCOs in our Flight due to his calm demeanor, easy humor, and common sense solutions to problems. Dapperdo rolled down the window and kindly asked us to get our asses over there so we could get our damned lunches already. We both walked over to the truck as Dapperdo tossed the Box Nasties at us through the driver's door window.

Chamberpot took his lunch, walked around to the passenger side of the vehicle and hopped in the truck. Dapperdo, who rarely abided folks riding shotgun when he was at the helm, momentarily overcame his instinct to ask Chamberpot just who the hell he thought he was and instead asked me what was wrong. I gave him the broken radio, and explained how I had used it to prevent Chamberpot from seriously fucking everything up.

Dapperdo took the radio. "Well, at least it was for a good cause. Don't worry about it; I'll take care of it." He gave a wry laugh, and then kindly asked Chamberpot to get in the back of the van where he belonged. As he warily eyed Chamberpot to make sure he didn't just wander off, he looked over his shoulder to the back of the van and kindly asked SSgt Wizniewski to get his ass the hell off the truck and do something useful for once.

As Wiz shambled off the truck, Dapperdo turned back to me and said, "Wiz'll help you out with that flap write-up."

I thanked Dapperdo as Wiz rounded the front of the truck and confidently declared, "We're gonna have to cann a spoiler actuator."

This was news to me as I thought we had a flap problem, but Wiz sounded so damned confident in what he was saying that it must've been true. That was Wiz's game. The guy was the most confident and boisterous mechanic on the flight line, though no one could remember the last time he'd actually done anything of note. The thing was, the guy was so damned good at bullshitting that everyone simply believed everything he was saying and would forget that he usually had no clue what he was talking about. He was the Teflon sergeant--nothing stuck to him.

Now, when we were just hanging out, everyone gave him shit about being such a loser, but once he was out on the flight line and confidently declaring something to be thus-and-so, we fell under the enchanting power of his words and listened to him as if he were God dictating the Ten Commandments to Moses. I think he missed his true calling. He would've made a great politician. In all the years since, I've never met anyone else who could match his ability to not only make people forget what an awful mechanic he was, but also to simply take everything he said at face value.

Despite all that, MSgt Dapperdo's BS detector still registered a weak signal. "You don't think they have any in supply?"

"Nah, they never do. I've been here 14 years and never seen one issue out of supply." Wiz held his arms akimbo and thrust his chest out in an obvious display of manly confidence.

That was good enough for Dapperdo. "Alright, get everything ready out here, and then I'll come back and pick you up so you can go over and cann that part."

Wiz gave a curt nod and motioned for me to follow him. "Help me get this stand in place, and then you can go eat your lunch while I take care of the spoiler."

I shrugged my shoulders and set my lunch at the bottom of the crew entry door before running over to help Wiz reposition a B-2 stand underneath the left wing. Once in place, we jacked the stand up to the appropriate height, locked the wheels, and proceeded up the steps. I had never messed with this system in any depth, and I sure as hell hadn't changed

out a spoiler actuator before, so I figured I'd follow Wiz up the stand and ask him how it all worked.

Wiz told me to take out the pressure switch, since there was a chance that it might be the problem. If it was, it was an easy fix and we'd save time cann'ing a spoiler actuator from another plane. It would also make him look better in the eyes of his superiors, who minutes before were expecting a lengthy delay and heavy maintenance, only to find that the clever and resourceful SSgt Wizniewski had quickly and cheaply solved the problem.

I started to unscrew the pressure switch from its housing and noticed some hydraulic fluid seeping out of the bottom. I paused for a second and heard systems running. I turned to Wiz and asked, "Shouldn't systems be turned off?"

He laughed at my meager systems knowledge. "No, no. Those are systems 2 & 3. This runs off system 4. It's all right. Go ahead and take it out."

Who was I to argue with the guy? He obviously knew what he was talking about. After all, I figured if the system were pressurized, hydraulic fluid would be misting like water out of a garden hose by now. I continued unscrewing the transmitter, momentarily forgetting that for systems 2 & 3 to be running, at least system 1 or 4 had to be running as well (and that was bad). The last thing I remember hearing at that moment was a hollow "Pop!" and feeling a dull pain in my shoulder. Then I was wet.

I quickly knelt down and searched the grated floor of the stand for the transmitter and found it by Wiz's left foot. Luck was with me for once as the transmitter hadn't fallen through the grating of the stand and 30 feet to the ground. It would've been a nightmare trying to find in the dark, while hydraulic fluid saturated the ground as it sprayed out of the wing at 3,000 psi. I picked-up the transmitter and managed to screw it back in half-blind, cutting off the torrent of hydraulic fluid.

I was completely soaked through with the oily red liquid. I yelled at Wiz to get me a rag since I didn't want to risk opening my eyes with the shit covering my face. I felt the stand bounce rapidly as he went down the ladder. I tasted hydraulic fluid in my mouth. It was sweet.

While he was gone, I took off my BDU blouse and threw it over the stand rail just to get it off me. I stood there alone on the maintenance stand, eyes closed and ears full of fluid, and wet in all sorts of uncomfortable places, wondering how in the hell I was going to explain all this. Most of the time, the only thought in your head when you fuck up is, "I hope nobody saw that." Considering my drenched state, it didn't really matter. I was soaked to the bone and there was no way it was going to dry before anyone of importance showed their face.

I felt Wiz climbing back up the stand and as he handed me the rag he said, "Dude, don't worry. I called Wizard-6 and he's on his way over right now so you can get out of here and take a shower."

I wiped the hydraulic fluid off my face and opened my eyes, seeing just how soaked I was for the first time. It didn't look good. My exposed skin glistened under the ramp lights and instead of their distinctive woodland camouflage, my BDU pants were jet black. I looked like I had just been dipped in motor oil. That's when the realization hit me, sending waves of panic through my gut. "How did you get a hold of Wizard-6?"

"Oh, I just ran next door and borrowed their radio for a minute. It's cool." Wiz crouched so he could see under the wing and all the way down the flight line. He pointed at a set of approaching headlights. "There he is. He's coming this way."

"What did you tell him?" I was afraid I already knew the answer, but I had to ask anyway.

"I told him you took a hydro shower and needed to get home so you could change and clean yourself up," he replied innocently enough.

The sumbitch had just condemned me to several weeks of unrelenting ball busting. I would not soon hear the end of this. Since the call had gone out over the air, everyone from the DCM to the lowliest airman had heard what happened to me. Resigned to my fate, I slowly made my way down the stand. My boots had absolutely no traction and I kept slipping with every step, but I managed to make it down the stand without breaking my neck. I quickly wished I had met some unfortunate fate when I saw the truck pull up.

Apparently, everyone who was inside doing nothing heard the radio call and had hopped inside the truck to come out and take a gander at me. I looked through the truck's side window and saw the wide grins and pointing fingers of the people inside. As I got closer, I could hear their laughter.

I finally made it to the driver's door and Dapperdo just sat there chuckling at me. He kindly asked me what the fuck I had been thinking.

I was about to reply when Wiz broke in, "Ah, it wasn't his fault. He took out the transmitter with systems on and got a hydraulic shower. He got it back in fast enough, though. Saved us a lot of work." He flashed me a toothy grin and a thumbs-up in an attempt to make me believe that he'd just stood up for me, though that was far from the truth. The hydraulic fluid must've acted as some sort of shield that was impenetrable to his bullshit, because I could see right through his charade.

Through a series of deliberately backhanded actions, Wiz had guaranteed that whenever someone remembered this event, it would only have my name attached to it. I'd just been witness to the secret of the Teflon sergeant: In addition to his bullshit field, he was adept at associating his fuck-ups with other people and essentially erasing his own involvement from their memories. In the aircraft maintenance world, it didn't matter whether you really fucked something up or not. All that mattered was whether your name was attached prominently enough in relation to an event that whenever people saw or heard it, they

associated it with the fuck-up. A lot of guys had been wrongly branded because of their inability to distance themselves from incidents and make sure their names never got attached to them in any meaningful way. The next time they screwed up for real, they tended to receive a harsher punishment than what would normally be meted out.

I was lucky in this case. For one thing, I was just an airman so I was expected to fuck-up. Second, I had quickly remedied the problem and saved extra work, which was always a bonus in the maintenance world. Finally, Dapperdo seemed more amused than anything at the sight of an airman soaked to the bone in hydraulic fluid. It didn't help that as Wiz and I were explaining the sequence of events, some wise-ass decided to place elephant diapers (absorbent material) under my feet to catch all the hydraulic fluid that was dripping off of me.

Dapperdo kindly asked one of the rubberneckers in the back of the truck to put some fucking rags and diapers on the goddamned seat so I could get in the truck and sit down. As we drove off, the guys sitting in the back with me offered fifty different pieces of advice on how to deal with my uniform. Some said to throw it away, others said to wash it 10 or 15 times to see if that helped. My fellow dorm buddies nixed that particular idea, since they sure as hell didn't want to be the ones to wash their clothes after I had just put a hydraulic fluid-infused uniform into the washing machine.

Dapperdo was nice enough drop me off by my car. He kindly asked me to get the fuck off the truck and stay the hell at home. "You've had it bad enough for one night. See ya tomorrow."

I thanked him, said goodbye to the guys in the truck, then got into my car and drove off to my dorm. Half an hour later, I was lying in my bunk bed watching TV when my stomach started growling. It suddenly occurred to me that I'd left my damned lunch out by the crew entry door, uneaten. I silently cursed to myself when someone banged on my door. I hopped off the top bunk and opened the door to see Wolf, my next-door neighbor, grinning at me. It was 2030, so he was already three sheets to the wind.

"Dude, I heard what happened, man!"

"What can you do?" I shrugged.

"You hungry, man? I got some pizza left over if you want some. I got some beer too. Wanna come over?"

I said sure and followed him over to his room. He opened his door and I was greeted by six cases of beer, two uneaten pizzas, and a couple of unfortunate-looking women.

The pizza was good, the beer was warm, and the women were ignored. It didn't turn out to be such a bad night after all.

*Regarding the C & I valve episode: In actuality, depressing the C & I valves is merely a precautionary procedure to open the aft doors in Truckbed mode. You could safely actuate the aft doors without depressing them, but there exists the slight possibility that the locks may not engage the pressure door, so it's better to be safe than sorry. Of course, they never explained that to us. They preferred to scare us into performing the procedure instead of skipping it in the checklist.

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